DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 060 819 HE 002 964

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TITLE Some Common and Not So Common Approaches to the Study of College Environments and Their Effects.
INSTITUTION State Univ. of New York, Stony Brook.
PUB DATE 72
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the 1972 Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *College Environment; *College Students; *Evaluation Methods; *Higher Education

ABSTRACT

This paper presents an analysis of some of the theoretical and methodological frameworks employed in the study of college environments and their effects on students. Generally, analysts only view the college environment from one point of view - that of the overall college environment. However, a variety of approaches is needed in order to accurately describe an environment with subenvironments that more often than not affect students more than the overall environment. Analysts are interested in the effects of college on students in 3 major areas: (1) student change, (2) student stability, and (3) student outcome. The following general approaches have been used to describe, measure, and classify colleges and their environments: (1) anthropological vignettes; (2) conventional (nominal) typologies; (3) attributes of members; (4) demographic, near-demographic, physical, and related institutional characteristics; (5) social structural and social organizational dimensions; and (6) "climate" of the college. The author offers a developmental model that incorporates several of these approaches. (Author/HS)

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SOME COMMON AND NOT SO COMMON APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF COLLEGE ENVIRONMENTS AND THEIR EFFECTS

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Paper read at the 1972 Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association

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In this paper, I wish to analyze some of the theoretical and methodological frameworks employed in the study of college environments and their effects on students. Emphasis is placed on the less commonly used orientations--not only because of their intrinsic worth, but also because a discussion of them throws into relief some of the underlying assumptions of the more commonly used frameworks.

The following general approaches have been used to describe, measure, and classify colleges and their environments: (1) anthropological vignettes; (2) conventional (nominal) typologies; (3) attributes of members; (4) demographic, near-demographic, physical, and related institutional characteristics; (5) social structural and social organizational dimensions; and (7) "climate" of the college (as measured by aggregating the perceptions of individuals in the college of the events, conditions, practices, opportunities, and pressures of the total environment).

Many, perhaps most, investigators of college environments use only one specific approach to college assessment--presumably the one that best fits each investigator's theoretical orientation or the research question at hand. Some researchers, although essentially employing only one approach with its attendant measuring instruments, do make use of instruments from other approaches to validate or help interpret the primary instruments of their own studies. Other investigators are relatively eclectic in that the overall college environment is measured in a number of ways, presumably because of the assumption by the researcher that a variety of approaches is needed to ensure satisfactory understanding. This sort of eclectic approach might beneficially be taken one step further by investigating the possible causal relationships among the environmental variables under study.

There is nearly complete consensus among educational researchers that a student confronts many environments in college. This is usually taken to mean that a student is not only in some one overall environment; he also participates

in one or more college subenvironments as well as experiencing his own individually-tailored environment, as it were. But it seems to me that analysts of either college subenvironments or individually perceived and constructed environments still assume in practice only one overall or global environment, albeit one measured in a number of ways as part of a number of approaches. That is, the underlying assumption (more often than not made implicitly) is that the methods and approaches to the assessment of the general college environment may vary, but they are all getting at the same thing--namely, the <u>one</u> overall environment of each college.

It might be useful, however, to conceive of several distinct (although interrelated) overall environments for any college or university. It is therefore possible that the different instruments, representing different assessment approaches, in one degree or another actually measure different total or general environments. Moreover, it is plausible that certain of these environments conceptually and empirically "precede" others of these environments. In short, some overall environments may be seen as causally dependent upon others. As a simple example,[1] it may be posited that the aggregatively perceived environmental "climate" of a college is in part determined by the actual pattern of the college members' behaviors and activities, both of which in turn are partially determined by social organizational features of the college. Finally, demographic and related institutional features of the college may causally affect each of these three environments.[2]

One reason for assessing differences among colleges is an interest in the differential <u>impacts</u> of different college environments. The meaning of "impact" is problematic. Usually the phrase "college impact" refers to college-induced <u>change</u> in students. The most common way to guage change is to calculate a difference score (corrected or uncorrected for unreliability and other artifactual components) for students at two different points in time (usually when entering and when leaving college). To define and measure

"impact" exclusively in terms of change is too narrow an interpretation and operationalization of the concept, however. Under certain conditions non-change or stability may also indicate impact (see Feldman, 1969).

In recent years there has been increasing use of models that focus on college outcomes rather than on change and stability. This, in part, is due to the advocacy and use by Alexander Astin and his associates of a two-stage input-output model (Astin and Panos, 1966, 1971). The attempt is to explain the variation in student outcome on some variable by using a variety of input characteristics of students and the characteristics of their colleges. The model does not fully resolve the conceptual and methodological difficulties arising from the multicollinearity of student input and college environmental variables. Other outcome procedures--including the use of path analytic techniques--have been suggested as possible solutions (see Astin, 1970, Creager, 1971, and Feldman, 1971b).

Any of the various outcome procedures, including the two-stage input-output design, has the benefit of being appropriate for assessing college impacts on variables (such as dropping out of college) for which it is not possible to calculate a full-fledged change score. More than this, the current models focusing on outcomes have the great value of "forcing" the investigator to include multiple student input variables when examining the association between environmental variables and student outcome(s). Finally, as Cronbach and Furby (1970) persuasively argue, a change score is in some ways a rather artifical construct. Their article should be carefully read for the statement of their reasons why research personnel-decision problems might be better handled by methods that concentrate on using student inputs and college characteristics to predict and explain student outcomes.

Whether focusing on college student change, stability, or outcome, analysts explicitly or implicitly make two important decisions concerning conceptual distinctions and emphases. The first involves a specification of what it is about the student that may or may not change during the college years: just

what are the properties of students that can be affected; and how are changes or outcomes best interpreted? Secondly, there is a decision about the degree of emphasis to be placed on the following two general sets of influences involved in student change, stability, or outcome: (1) internal psychological mecnanisms of the student, and (2) contents, forms, and processes of social structural arrangements and pressures of the school and the larger society. These matters are handled in different ways in each of the three categories of orientations that I would now like to discuss.

In the first of these--the developmental approach--student variables are chosen that either are direct "growth" variables or are variables more or less directly interpretable in such terms. Change, stability or outcome is seen as indicating the degree to which the individual has or has not attained a higher level as a personality--for example, a higher level of maturation, or greater self-actualization, or increased ego-identity stabilization, or some such. Although the social impetus for change, stability or outcome may be analyzed in this approach, there typically is more systematic concern paid to individual psychological dynamics; environmental and social structural parameters tend to be considered only insofar as they <u>immediately</u> impinge on personality development.

What I wish to stress at this point is that a developmental framework--even though it underlies a good deal of the work on college students and appears to be the most frequently used, if not dominant, approach--is only one of several usable frameworks. An obvious value of this approach is that it extends to late adolescence and early adulthood a theoretical framework that is widely used in analyzing the periods of infancy, childhood, and early adolescence. Moreover, it is focused on matters of great interest to many counselors, teachers, educators, and researchers (namely, the underlying psychological and maturational processes linked to college environments). But in using this approach, certain risks are run. Since not all changes (even of psychological attributes) are necessarily connected with maturity, the

framework may be--and I think has been--used inappropriately. In such cases, an interpretation of data is made in terms of maturity when it is not justified, thus leading in effect to misinterpretation. Furthermore, as I have argued in detail elsewhere(Feldman, 1972), underlying this approach are the assumptions of the "goodness" and naturalness" of certain changes and outcomes. Changes and outcomes are viewed in the value-laden terms of individual "progress." It seems to me that such assumptions and viewpoints have not always been warranted in interpreting data, advising students, or drawing policy implications. In addition to not always avoiding these risks, those using a developmental approach have a tendency to overly "psychologize" the measurement of environment and the interpretation of structural arrangements and social pressures.

Investigators working within the other two theoretical approaches to be discussed tend to choose student dimensions of change, stability, or outcome that either are not necessarily interpretable in terms of maturity and personality growth or are clearly uninterpretable in such terms. The emphasis of both of these approaches is considerably more on the structures and dynamics of social pressures impinging on students than on the internal psychological dynamics initiating change, buttressing stability, or leading to certain outcomes. Moreover, these approaches are focused on important dimensions either ignored or underplayed by the developmentalists.

In the first of these alternative approaches--the social organizational approach--investigators concentrate initially and primarily on the variation among colleges. The emphasis is on describing, analyzing, and measuring organizational and social structural characteristics and arrangements of colleges, whether or not these features have implications for student development and maturity. As an aspect of examining college differences, certain differential impacts in terms of student change, stability or outcome are predicted and perhaps found. These of course may be interpreted within a developmental framework; but they need not be, and the social organizational approach in and of itself does not "demand" developmental interpretations on the part of

the investigator. Indeed, the social organizational orientation is generally neutral about or orthogonal to a developmental approach.[3]

In the other alternative to the developmental framework, theorists concentrate on the distinctive life-cycle and larger social-system context of college students by emphasizing the societal functions of higher education. The impact of college is analyzed in terms of the movement of students within a general, national social system in which college is a subsystem in interaction with other subsystems.

One part of this approach is concerned with the certification and hypothesized gate-keeping function of higher education. Rather than focusing on changes in individual traits and attributes (or lack of such changes), the focus is on the ways in which college (1) certifies students for certain social and occupational positions in the world of the middle and upper-middle class, (2) channels them in these directions, and (3) to some extent ensures them of entrance to such positions.

Specific changes in behaviors, attitudes, and psychological attributes are not inevitably discussed within a certification or gate-keeping context. When they are, the discussion is generally in terms of how colleges, wittingly or unwittingly, prepare students for their new roles in given social structures. As Walter Wallace (1964) has put it, colleges "shape students toward statuses and roles for which they have never before been eligible" (p. 303). Apart from the specific skills, motives, and attitudes that they may need in their future positions, college students have attached to them during college new and validated social statuses to which the new personal qualities are appropriate. The individual student is incorporated into new social positions within college, after which he may be routinely motivated and encouraged to take on the qualities appropriate to these positions. Moreover, as a student progresses through college, those around him define and label him according to the positions he hopes to occupy when he leaves college as well as by the new positions he occupies in college. In addition to (and as part of) others' view of him, he

is given opportunities to engage in behaviors that were previously either not open to him, not particularly feasible, or not easily do-able. As new social identities are pressed upon him, and as he is given the structural opportunities to practice and enact their behavioral implications, the student may well begin to conceive of himself as being a different person from what he once was. It may be hypothesized, in addition, that any change in overall self-conception in turn leads to changes in a variety of more specific psychological and attitudinal attributes.

In sum, then, researchers interested in life-cycle movement of students ocassionally may examine such psychological characteristics as abilities, aptitudes, predispositional traits, and self-conceptions. But they tend to do so only as a concomitant aspect of their primary focus on properties that are attached to the individual student by the group--that is, social roles within college, antitipated roles after college, imputed current and future social identities, types of certification, and the like. Personality development <u>per se</u> is not a focus. Developmentalists may wish, or course, to interpret the change, stability and outcomes posited or empirically documented by these researchers in terms of personality growth. They should be aware, however, that some of the changes and outcomes will seem to them negative--that is, evidence of decreased maturity and personality regression. What is even more likely is that they will find some or even may of these outcomes simply uninterpretable within a developmental framework.

Although it cannot be a consideration here, it should be noted that the alternative models to the developmental framework have biases, ambiguities, and risks of their own. Hence, just as each of the three theoretical approaches described is valuable for different reasons, each has limitations. Each indeed may be necessary to the study of college students, but no one of them is sufficient. The next step is to specify more completely the conditions under which it is fruitful to use one approach rather than another. It is also of importance to explore the interfaces among these approaches as well as the ways in which they can be combined or integrated in the analysis of college impacts.

Notes

1. See Feldman (1971a) for elaboration of this example.

2. I am not arguing against the usefulness of studying college subenvironments and individually perceived and constructed environments. Research efforts in these areas have become a deservedly important part of the study of college environments. If anything, I would like to see even more work in these areas--particularly in the specification of the causal relationships among subenvironments and individually experienced environments, and among each of these with the various kinds of overall environments.

3. An example: Bidewell and Vreeland (1963) offer a typology of colleges as social organizations based on the variability among colleges in the scope of the client-member (i.e., student) role and the variability of goals ("moral" or "technical"), from which predictions are made about the direction, intensity, and homogeneity of students' value and attitude changes. These changes are not interpreted as personality development.

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